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AUTHOR Chesser, Jo Sykes; McNeal, Larry
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ABSTRACT

This study examines the Study Circles program on education that was conducted in Arkansas and Oklahoma in the fall of 1998. Study Circles are a community involvement strategy for collaborative problem solving. They are small, highly participatory groups led by trained facilitators using materials provided by the Study Circles Resource Center. The Study Circles provide an opportunity to large numbers of citizens to deliberate issues. This was the first time statewide educational organizations had been implemented for racial and criminal justice deliberations. Each partner in the program collaborated to develop and revise pre- and post-questionnaires. The questionnaires were used to provide demographic and other participant information, evaluate the program, and examine the impact of their efforts. Preliminary information received from these first efforts indicates a positive response to this type of group dialogue and collaboration. A larger percentage of parents with school age children were noted in participating communities organized through the school superintendents. Plans are being made for an impact survey as a follow-up to the implementation and results of the group's action plans for their public schools. (Contains 21 references.) (JDM)

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Jo Sykes Chesser
Department of Educational Leadership
University of Arkansas at Little Rock
Little Rock, Arkansas
Tjchesser@ualr.edu

Larry McNeal
Department of Educational Leadership
University of Arkansas at Little Rock
Little Rock, Arkansas
Lxmcneal@ualr.edu

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Abstract

Can community engagement that fosters dialogue between diverse individuals and groups result in school improvement and increased parental involvement in public schools? This study examines the Study Circles program on education (Calling the Roll: Study Circles for Better Schools) that was conducted in Arkansas and Oklahoma in the fall of 1998. Study Circles are a community involvement strategy for collaborative problem solving. They are small, highly participatory groups led by trained facilitators using materials provided by the Study Circles Resource Center. Used for racial and criminal justice deliberation, this is the first time statewide organizations on education have been implemented.

Each partner of Calling the Roll: Study Circles for Better Schools had specific goals related to the needs of their state or organization, but they collaborated to develop and revise pre and post questionnaires. The questionnaires were to provide demographics and other participant information, evaluate the Study Circles program, and examine the impact of their efforts. Participants took the pre questionnaire before the Study Circles began. After four two-hour sessions, the post questionnaires were given.

Fourteen communities provided research data from 626 pre-questionnaires and 380 post questionnaires. From these questionnaires, 243 were pre-post matches. The Center for Research on Teaching and Learning at the University of Arkansas in Little Rock is analyzing the questionnaires. The information received from these first efforts indicates a positive response to this type of group dialogue and collaboration. A larger percentage of parents with school age children were noted in the communities that were organized through the school superintendents.

Although the data implicated success in the program beginning, an impact survey will be conducted in the fall of 1999 as a follow-up of the implementation and results of the group's action plans for their public schools. New communities are organizing Study Circles and the research groups will continue to evaluate the results.

School Improvement through Community Dialogue:
The First Community Study Circles on Education in Arkansas and Oklahoma

Introduction

According to Spillane and Regnier (1998), "Nothing happens in the school system without at least tacit support from the community, and no significant changes can be made without willing support" (p. 183). This appears to be the predicament of educational reform. New programs, new strategies, and new management systems have failed to satisfy the communities of our nation. DeYoung (1986) found that the failed attempts to reform the schools have issued…"a new wave of student and parent protests…claiming that school had become irrelevant to the real lives and interests of students" (p. 97). Parents and communities who once applauded the call for educational change to accommodate skilled workers in industry during the first half of the 20th century are now demanding the schools change to accommodate the technological age for the 21st century student. Parents who have children in the public schools want their students to develop problem solving skills, teamwork techniques, and critical thinking methods.

Parents are only part of a community. Others such as homeowners, renters, senior citizens, small and large businesses, religious groups, political parties, youth sports leagues, service clubs, ethnic organizations, the news media, the arts community, civic associations, labor unions and other special interest groups all make up a community (Spillane & Regnier, 1998). As the leader of the school in a community, the superintendent is accountable to the people who belong to these groups since public education is supported by those who pay taxes in the community. Today's superintendent sees that the way the public perceives the schools is changing profoundly (Gallagher, Bagin, & Kindred, 1997). Public elementary and secondary education are viewed with questions and concerns as the public sees the variety of new programs adopted in the schools begun only to be discarded because they did not work.

Change is occurring and the reconnection of the citizens in a community with their schools is imperative in today's educational environment (Houston & Bryant, 1997). Accountability for educational systems is spiraling to new heights as the pressure from parents; business and community leaders call for change. Changes in education are inevitable. Sarason (1995) predicted that "by the year 2020 public dissatisfaction with our schools will have brought a partial dismantling to the public school system" (p. 85). Many educators face the reality that this will occur much sooner than Saranson predicted. Houston (1998) believes that those schools designed for the mid 20th century will become obsolete before the end of the century - "they no longer meet the needs of the businesses that employ their graduates, utilize the technology that drives our society, nor involve their communities in viable ways" (p.47). With warnings such as these, it is reasonable to expect the public to find substance in their dissatisfaction with their community school, especially if they are uninformed and feel that their opinions do not matter.

Community Involvement and Communications

Increasingly superintendents are finding that special interest groups can develop and drive their own agenda unless the entire community is involved in the vision and goals for the students of a school district. Much education policy and practice is formed due to the "competing demands of group interests" (Carter & Cunningham, 1997, p. 47). The polls that shape the views of policymakers indicate this struggle for ownership of public schools by parents is growing yearly. The 30th annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public School revealed "the percentage of American who believe that public school parents should have more say in such aspects of school operations as selection and hiring of teachers and administrators, setting of their salaries, and selection of books for school libraries has increased significantly since the question was first asked in 1990" (Rose and Gallup, 1999, p. 23).

Although individuals within a community may have a low confidence level in the quality of the public schools, their involvement in the schools is lacking as seen in elections and school board meetings. Even when state policymakers implement education reform policies, according to Mutchler (1993), they experience lack of public support and a declining public trust. The process of reform within a community's school system may never be realized within the community unless effective communication can engage these citizens in discussions concerning the schools. These factors also impact the developing of a shared vision of schools.

Johnson (1996) stated "…the process of designing a vision for district reform appears to be almost as important as the ultimate content" (p. 75). The community has a vision and a superintendent who does not attempt to find that vision through communication with the members of that community will have difficulty with the success of his or her own vision. These community members judge a superintendent by the respect they are given when they wish to participate in the decision making process that leads to a vision for their school. Those who have their own agendas and those who simply want to be heard can withhold support when change is being implemented (Johnson, 1996). In both cases, if the vision is not shared the goals of education become harder to achieve. This is particularly true when education organizations are facing change.

School improvement must result from the involvement of all stakeholders in the process of change. Education is everyone's responsibility, not just the parents. Some in a community would suggest that the schools are for students and their parents and feel no obligation to support the educational needs of the schools. Tax credits and vouchers are examples of arguments these citizens use, however, "this view is dangerous to the future of public education and should not be furthered by supporters of public schools" (Spillane & Regnier, 1998, p. 183). Citizens must be

informed about "the long-term economic and social advantages of an educated citizenry" (p. 183) because the "payoff for public engagement is everybody operating out of a common vision of what they want for children" (Houston & Bryant, 1997, p. 759).

Houston and Bryant (1997) further stated their belief that the media is the only avenue of communication from schools to most of the public. Gallagher, Bagin and Kindred (1997) agree that the mass media —" printed publications, newspapers, slides, filmstrips, motion pictures, videos, exhibits, radio, and television" represented "much of the communication that takes place between school personnel and people in the community" (p. 81).

The recent 30th Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll (which was composed of 67% of adults with no children in school) respondents indicated their belief that new methods of communication from the public school would be effective: e.g., public school news hotlines, Internet "chat rooms", and televised school board meetings (Rose & Gallup, 1998, p.33). The future of public education in the 21st century may well depend upon the information systems utilized by schools to all community citizens.

Spillane and Reginier (1998) point out that "parents remain, of course, the schools' essential base of support" (p. 184) and schools recognize the need for parent involvement, but many teachers find there are no parents to work with. Not all parents have gotten on the train to energize educational reform. For many, the facing of daily life situations such as the strain of divorce, financial stress, and loss of family support have led them to seek equilibrium in order to survive. The percentage of families with children headed by a single parent is growing in Arkansas and Oklahoma as well as across the United States (Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 1998). Watson (1994) emphasized that talk of reform is useless unless citizens can deal with the problems in this country: problems such as a "full stomach and a warm

body and decent health" (p. 5). The public needs to understand the plight of all students and their parents, not just those who are dissatisfied with the school setting; yet, it is these dissatisfied parents who have taken this train of school reform out of the roundhouse.

Dissatisfied parents have linked with educational leaders, political leaders, child advocacy leaders, and most recently, business leaders who realize the stake they have in an educated citizenry – a stake that is rapidly showing signs of decline as students enter the work force without needed skills. Some parents are frustrated when they try to influence their own situations in the schools and community affairs. It is easier to ignore the problem rather than cause more confusion in their lives. Tyack (1997) points out if local citizens lose the sense that they can shape institutions, their participation in civic affairs would understandably be less. As parents and other citizens neglect to participate in educational reform, there is a decrease in their influences upon the changes made. There is indication that many parents do not understand the educational system and will only get involved when it directly involves their child. This disconnection from parents and other community citizens contributes to the lack of support for funding needs (North Little Rock Study Circles, 1999). The present call to reform the schools of the country can no longer neglect those who are not involved in the support of their community public schools.

Reforms (or restructuring) of the nation's schools had attempted to draw in the citizens of the community in projects and management of the school (such as site-based management). Participation with the school appears to have strong support among superintendents, principals, teachers, and the public. Although the support has involved many citizens, the attitude has not been one of empowerment, but rather disenpowerment, particularly for the poor and minority

and other parents who are turning to vouchers so they can choose their own school (Anderson, 1998).

Collaboration has been an increasingly significant feature of school restructuring in the 1990's. Empowering others to insure school improvement has been the continuing theme in restructuring. Ledell (1996) stated, "Because citizens fund public education, they have the right and responsibility to help make decisions". The difficulty arises in assuring that all citizens have a say in their school system. In observing those who get the attention of the school district time, Ledell noted that the supporters and critics were receiving the largest majority of the school district leader's time. These groups were receiving 95% of public communication to school district leaders, yet represented only 30% of the community. This leaves 70% of the community without a voice in the decision-making process. Collaboration with others in the educational system and the community requires an understanding of the ways that successful communication is carried out. According to Bolton (1979), "Communication is the lifeblood of every relationship. When open, clear, and sensitive communication takes place, the relationship is nurtured. When communication is guarded, hostile, or ineffective, the relationship falters" (p. 6). It would appear that the very process of communication affects how we relate to other people and how we respond to a changing educational landscape.

Calling the Roll: Study Circles for Better Schools

A program called Study Circles is one method that could enable innovations in that it offers an opportunity to large numbers of citizens to deliberate issues. These diverse views and opinions on critical issues in a safe environment where opinions can be spoken without intimidation have an ultimate goal of developing action ideas and plans to address these issues (Leighninger & McCoy, 1998). Study Circles are a method of democratic deliberation that

involves all members in a community in dialogue. Since Study Circle programs involve large numbers of people, the web of connections between the public and the schools can be strengthened. When a broad coalition of community groups organize the circles, it is more likely that parents, students, senior citizens, neighborhood residents, teachers, administrators, and businesspeople will take part.

A study circle is:

- A group of 8-12 people who meet regularly to address a critical issue
- Facilitated by someone who does not give their own opinions on the issue, but helps create a balanced, honest, productive discussion
- Open to many different views on what we should do
- A diverse mix of people
- A springboard for action (Study Circles Resource Center, 1999)

Study Circles are a community involvement strategy for collaborative problem solving. They are small, highly participatory groups led by trained facilitators using techniques and materials provided by the Study Circles Resource Center (SCRC) of Pomfret, Connecticut. This center was established in 1989 to promote the use of study circles on critical social and political issues. It is a project of the Topsfield Foundation, a private, nonprofit, nonpartisan foundation whose mission is to advance deliberative democracy and improve the quality of public life in the United States. "Wherever the study circle has been tried, the groups employing this low-cost, flexible format have found great value in their discussions" (Study Circles Resource Center, 1991).

Local institutions are helped to connect to the larger community by Study Circles program. Calling the Roll: Study Circles for Better Schools was the first time that SCRC

developed a statewide effort using the study circle concept to focus on public education. The statewide effort was developed through the collaboration of the partners from 1997 to the culmination of the Study Circles held in the fall of 1998 in Arkansas and Oklahoma. SCRC provided resource materials, training of coordinators and facilitators, and other technical assistance during this period.

Arkansas Friends for Better Schools and the Oklahoma League of Women Voters were supported in Calling the Roll by SCRC and the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) in Austin, Texas. SEDL's mission is to find, share, and sustain effective solutions for the most urgent problems facing educational systems, practitioners, and decision-makers in the southwestern United States. SEDL's particular emphasis is on ensuring educational equity for children and youth who live in poverty, who are minorities, or who have mental or physical exceptionalities (SEDL, 1999). Research was conducted by SEDL, SCRC, and the two supporting university partner — the University of Arkansas at Little Rock and the University of Oklahoma at Norman.

Pre and Post Questionnaires

Each partner of Calling the Roll: Study Circles for Better Schools had specific goals related to the needs of their state or organization, but they collaborated to develop and revise pre and post questionnaires. The questionnaires gathered demographics and other participant information, as well as served as an evaluation of the Study Circles program and the impact of the Study Circles on the development of action plans to assist the community public schools. Participants took the pre-questionnaire before the Study Circles began. After four two-hour sessions, the post questionnaires were given. The questionnaires were sent to the Center for

Research on Teaching and Learning (CRTL) at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock for coding, scanning and reporting of the descriptive statistics.

Results

Five communities in Arkansas provided research data from 262 pre-questionnaires and 216 post questionnaires. From these questionnaires, 152 were pre-post matches. Oklahoma had nine communities that provided research data from 338 pre questionnaires and 164 post questionnaires with 91 pre-post questionnaire matches. To ensure pre-post matches, the questionnaires were compared by questionnaire id (the last four digits of the participant's social security number) and the participant's birthdate. To ensure further accuracy, the questionnaires were recorded as they were received into CRTL. Group and location coding provided additional accuracy in determining the pre-post match. The final check for validation was through the post questionnaire that determined the number of sessions each participant attended.

Demographics of these participants revealed the diversity of the participants of the two states. The percentage of female to male participants was higher in Oklahoma than in Arkansas. Oklahoma's Calling the Roll participants were 77% female and 23% male. Arkansas Calling the Roll participants were 65% female and 35% male. Average age range of the two states were closely related. The average age of the participants in Arkansas ranged from 14 to 84 and in Oklahoma from 16 to 89; however, the average age in Arkansas was 42 and the average age in Oklahoma 50. The age range of participants in the 31-55 range for Arkansas was 68%; Oklahoma had 57%. Oklahoma's group of 56 or older (32%) was higher than Arkansas (14%).

The preliminary data from the post questionnaire indicated a positive response to this type of group dialogue and collaboration. In the area of decision-making on issues, 95% of both Arkansas and Oklahoma participants indicated that the comments made by group members were

useful in the participant's thinking about the issues. This was supported in the Arkansas open-ended questions from the post questionnaire. Flavin-McDonald (1999) found that Arkansas "participants appreciated having the chance, provided by the communications in the study circles, to hear and gain a better understanding of other community members' ideas and experiences" (Dickerson & Chesser, 1999). In response to the statement—The facilitator gave everyone a chance to talk about their opinions in the discussion—99% of Arkansas and Oklahoma participants strongly endorsed the role of the facilitator in providing a group environment that allowed for democratic discussion. Many participants (Arkansas - 86%; Oklahoma - 90%) responded that they would attend Study Circles in the future if their community chose to use this method as a means of allowing citizen participation in community issues.

Indications of the influence of the two states sponsoring organization are evident from the demographics of Arkansas and Oklahoma participants. It is seen even further in comparison of items that occur on either or both the pre and the post questionnaires. Of the top five ways that participants in Oklahoma heard about Study Circles, The League of Women Voters, the sponsoring organization in Oklahoma, was first with 44%. Arkansas participants (43%) heard of Calling the Roll through the school. Arkansas Friends asked the school superintendents and school boards to sponsor the Study Circles project. Evidence of the influence of the League of Women Voters is seen in the information about government and politics. Those participants that responded to the question about voting in an election revealed that 89% of Oklahoma participants had voted as compared to 75% for Arkansas participants of Calling the Roll. A relationship to the schools as organizer was also evident in the question asked Arkansas and Oklahoma participants: "How much do you know about the schools in your community?" A

significant relationship among the Arkansas participants was indicated by the Wilcoxson Signed Ranks Test ($p<.001$, 2 tailed). Further investigation into these relationships is ongoing with the partners of Calling the Roll.

Parents of Arkansas and Oklahoma

The percentage of parents with school age children who attended the 1998 Study Circles continues the basis for discussion of the influence of the sponsoring organizations. From the 262 participants who took the pre-questionnaire in Arkansas, 53% responded that they were parents of school age children. Of the 338 participants to begin their Study Circles in Oklahoma, 35% were parents of school age children. In the pre-post comparison, 72 Arkansas parents represented 47% of the pre/post matches. Thirty-one Oklahoma parents represented 34%, of the participants who took both pre and post questionnaires. The involvement and influence of school district leaders with school parents in the organization of this community project suggests a communication method for participation in new and innovative strategies for parent dialogue in school improvement. Information from the pre/post comparison revealed that parents who took the pre and post questionnaires related to the sponsoring organizations and state responses.

Arkansas parents from the pre/post match heard about the Study Circles project from the school (35%), and Oklahoma parents from the League of Women Voters (48%). Parents in Arkansas and Oklahoma differed in the schools their children were enrolled in. The Arkansas participants who took the pre and post tests (N=70) reported 99% enrollment in public schools. Oklahoma parents who took the pre and post tests (N=31) reported 87% in public schools, 10% in private schools, and 3% in home schools. These percentages reflect a need for further evaluation of the diversity of citizens that can be brought together by differing organizations to

learn of other citizen's views about education, discuss school issues, and deliberate possible solutions to these issues.

Implications for Further Research

Further research questions have surfaced from the pre and post questionnaires. Can public schools benefit when constituents come together to deliberate and develop plans of actions for issues that affect the students of the community schools? What impact does the transmission of the superintendent and/or school board's authority have in the process of this deliberation and collaboration? An impact survey developed in the fall of 1999 will evaluate the Arkansas Study Circles program a year following implementation of Calling the Roll: Study Circles for Better Schools. The action plans developed by the community, the changes that have occurred as a result of these action plans, and the institutionalization of the deliberative dialogue process as a method that communities can use to involve citizens will enable the researchers to collect qualitative data on the success of the program. Community information that was collected prior to the 1998 Study Circles program will be used as a reference to the changes in the community a year following the Calling the Roll program. The impact survey, along with community resource materials received from the five school superintendents prior to the beginning of Calling the Roll, may begin an understanding of the use of democratic deliberative discussion as a method that leads to 21st century school improvement. Early indications of the institutionalization of study circles into a community occurred at Alread, Arkansas where school board member and superintendent have worked together with their community to develop study materials on character development as it relates to their community's values. This effort is under the guidance of the Study Circles Resource Center with the new sponsoring organization for Study Circles in Arkansas — The Arkansas School Boards Association

Summary

The diversity of American citizens in the 21st century calls for innovative means of new communication strategies in this age of information. Leighninger and McCoy (1998) suggest there is a challenge to those who would organize or involve citizens. Since America has become "one of the most ethnically, culturally, and economically diverse societies in the history of the world" (p. 186), the difficulty lies in the communication process. For individuals to participate, they want to be convinced that this project leads to helping other people and they must know that they are needed and their opinion counts. These opinions, however, may cover the real feelings and emotions of the individual. The approach that the study circle method permits through the trained facilitator is similar to what Bolton (1979) described as reflective listening. Bolton stated that reflected listening works because "it helps the listener verify his understanding of what the speaker said" (p. 66). He goes further in the importance of the listening process in that he identifies the need of individuals to express "strong feelings, significant worries, or serious problems" (p. 75). When these feelings and emotions exist, "a person often feels alone and needs human contact and support" (p. 75).

Citizens want to know that they are not working alone, but they can find energy and strength from those in their communities. As citizens determine that there is a reason they should participate in a program and that their participation will result in change, they will join in the effort. "Ignoring the individual's part in the outcome will only assure their lack of participation" (Leighninger & McCoy, 1998, p. 185). This point was brought home by one of the citizens of Leslie, Arkansas, one of the first school systems to begin the new round of Study Circles in Arkansas in 1999. When questioned, she remarked, "A friend of mind stated that his attitude about schools had changed because he was able to share the hurts from his early school

experience. This raises a very important question: Is it possible that reform that was changed to restructure will change again to become "reconnection" — for the sake of the children of our nation?

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